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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern, and further actions and initiatives; priority theme: "The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges"

Statement submitted by Al-Hakim Foundation, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement

The fifty-sixth session of the Commission on the Status of Women convenes this year to discuss an extremely important topic, namely, the empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges.

The importance of this topic stems from the vital role played by rural women in strengthening agricultural and rural development, contributing to poverty eradication and striving to achieve the goal of food security. Rural women indeed play a major role in the rural economies of most countries; through their close relationship with the land, they carry out most of the planting, cultivation and harvesting activities in farming, which serves to indicate that women feed the whole community, in addition to performing such other tasks as looking after the home and taking care of children, the elderly and the sick.

International attention to rural women is therefore imperative, particularly considering the burdens facing them in employment and in life generally. This category of women is the one most affected by many of the problems confronting our modern-day world, including climate change, economic crisis, poverty, the spread of disease, malnutrition, illiteracy, exploitation and violence.

The challenges facing rural women, moreover, differ from those facing other categories of women. Most rural women, for instance, live far from the centres of decision-making and power in remote and sometimes isolated areas, without the available resources to own land and without transport, permanent housing, health care and protection. They are also deprived of the opportunities of education and access to modern technology.

At Al-Hakim Foundation, we firmly believe that the current session of the Commission on the Status of Women offers a great opportunity for the voice of rural women to be heard at the local, national and international levels. We take this opportunity to affirm the importance of participation by rural women in the process of discussing and taking decisions on matters relating to them, and the need to provide all forms of international support for infrastructural and community development under their leadership in order to promote advancement and empowerment. Global and national policies must also change in the interest of improving land ownership, transport, marketing, health care, credit, education and access to modern technology, which they urgently need and which will contribute to the development of millions of women. In this regard, we believe that the establishment of communication channels and partnerships between women's scientific centres and women in rural areas, together with the promotion of collective initiatives through civil-society organizations, networks and women's cooperatives, will contribute to the empowerment of women to participate fully in economic life across all sectors and at all levels. It will also lead to the strengthening of rural women and the establishment of more stable and fairer societies, as well as to achievement of the internationally agreed development goals and improvement of the quality of life for women, men, families and local communities.

With respect to the rural women of Iraq, in addition to the challenges and difficulties shared by all women the world over, they continue to suffer the consequences of the practices of the former dictatorship. Iraqi women also remain

the prime victims of terrorist activities targeted at civilians in Iraq, with the result that the number of widows has vastly increased, sounding the alarm that attention must be directed to adopting all measures and means to protect and support women in this category, preserve their dignity and empower them economically.

Al-Hakim Foundation, which is one of Iraq's largest civil-society institutions, engages in activities aimed at empowering Iraqi women, defending their rights and affording them appropriate opportunities at all levels of society. Several of its programmes have been devoted to providing economic support for rural women, particularly widows and poverty-stricken families, by way of direct material support, in kind or cash loans, or the establishment and financing of small income-generating projects for unemployed women in families with no breadwinner.

The Foundation additionally runs literacy courses in a number of Iraq's districts and subdistricts in order to educate and support rural women and enable them to realize their capacities for dialogue and building ideas.

It also regularly organizes various cultural, social and educational activities for rural women at the district and subdistrict levels, with effective participation by these women.

In order to develop professional and occupational capabilities and train rural women in modern technology, the Foundation has established vocational and scientific training courses for Iraqi rural women in order to provide them with the skills for venturing into working life with flair and self-confidence.

Through the activities of its Women's Affairs Department, Al-Hakim Foundation continues to work on strengthening Iraqi women and promoting their effective participation in public life and the political process by educating them about their rights and also by providing educational opportunities for young girls in a number of its training centres.

At the same time, the Foundation pursues its activities aimed at achieving justice for Iraqi women and fighting all forms of oppression and discrimination against them through various initiatives that it launched or adopted, including that of an Islamic day for combating violence against women, which is now an annual event involving scientific, cultural and media activities focused on stimulating the moral element of religion and bringing the religious factor to bear in the tribal context in order to end the phenomenon of violence against women. It successfully highlighted this phenomenon, which is suffered by women in all societies, and, following the involvement of many of Iraq's religious and social figures in this anti-violence initiative and inspired by the true religion of Islam, it devised a number of solutions and means for dealing with it.